

30. Q - Walwa Bush Nursing Centre Phase 2 Submission 20 Oct 2020

The Walwa Bush Nursing Centre is a small primary and emergency health provider in the border town of Walwa in the North East of The state. The very short period between the evacuation order and the shelter in place order due in part to a lack of continuity of communications across the border, meant large numbers of community were left in town as the fire impacted. Also problematic where the roadblocks that appeared and greatly confused any effort to leave as the Victorian Police had in accurate or no information about the situation (and the closure of roads) into NSW.

Whilst Walwa has a “recovery centre” this facility was not manned, nor did it have generated power. The bush nursing centre, that had generated power and emergency medical facilities as well as a large commercial kitchen was the obvious place for community to gravitate to. Those unable to get home due to road blocks, those too scared to go home due to fire activity, and those needing to access power to charge phones and torches or refrigeration for rapidly spoiling fridge contents all came to the WBNC. Despite not being designated as a recovery or refuge centre, that's what we became.

We discovered quickly that CFA were expected to return to Tallangatta (a 3 hr round trip) for food and rest, or food was supposed to be delivered to them locally. This was not happening. We therefore commenced providing three to six meals a day depending on demand to community, CFA and DELWP. In total with volunteers and a tiny skeleton staff we produced 600 meals over the period, often late into the night. CFA and DELWP slept in our accomodation, used our phones (when we were finally able to get landlines back 4 days after the first fire). Community slept on the floor in offices. As the only emergency medical provider, I remained on site to provide an emergency response if necessary.

We subsequently started to receive do rated goods, and transitioned again to become a recovery centre. We provided in excess of 100 welfare visits to deliver groceries and essential items and check on injuries incurred during the fires.

Whilst our service transitioned to respond to an identified need and provide the much needed refuge and Recovery services, we were told by the state government very clearly that we were on our own. We had chosen not to evacuate, we had chosen to stay, they therefore could not be seen to be assisting us. On the day I received this message, I had worked 8 20hr days straight in support of our community, CFA and DELWP. I went on to work 30 days straight without a break. To be abandoned in such a way by the state government was a significant blow. But it also brought into question how we were going to access the vital goods we needed to continue, in particular, fuel for the generator and a satellite phone so I was able to move around the community to check on community members but still be available for emergencies.

The state governments attitude was flawed for a number of reasons. Had our farming community evacuated leaving cattle on blacked paddocks, without fodder or water, the stock deaths would have been significantly higher. The disposal of dead stock and the biohazard created would have impacted and compounded an already traumatised community and also add another layer of complexity to the clean up.

When, in the State Government came (still without fuel or a satellite phone). They arrived in the early evening. It was the first occasion that my volunteers and myself had had to eat something for 24 hrs. We had gathered in our Board room. We had our shoes off and were relaxing. Those visiting from the State made multiple comments about our bare feet. I got the impression they were judging a lack of professionalism. They had lost sight of the fact that we were living on site 24/7. This was our down time.

Our attempts to get fuel for our generator were problematic. Without access to the state government recovery pathways, we had to beg fuel from RFS across the border. Subsequently, we contacted the army. We dealt with 5 different phone calls to establish why we needed fuel, on each Occasion asking the same things. On each occasion a promise of fuel within 24 hrs. Eventually 8 days later, the army turned up with fuel. They had 1000litres, we had no where to store it!!! We had to “steal” a fuel pod from a community member who had evacuated and hadn’t returned.

When road blocks started to ease and services started to come to town. There was zero recognition of the work we had been doing already. They came to us when we were flat out, without appointments and wanted to meet. They told us about individuals we had by this stage been working with for days. But importantly, they also completely ignored the fact that we were all fire effected. We had all lost farms, stock, possessions, a way of life. These outside providers came with demands of our time, with no respect for the fact that we were also fire victims, and for the work we had been doing.

The State government sent Ambulance Victoria to provide some assistance. Initially in the early days when we literally had Just me and a volunteer providing all of the emergency response AV called on the only satellite phone and asked how many paramedics we wanted. They were going to chopper them in. We discussed it and decided 2 would work, that would give us two teams of a paramedic and a RAN and a paramedic and an advanced first Aider. We called AV back to tell them our decision to be told “no, we can’t get you any assistance, we will chopper paramedics to Corryong, we can’t chopper them to you”. Subsequently AV sent paramedic support 3 weeks following the original fires. But they gave them zero primary care training. They are exceptionally expert at emergency care, they no little about primary care. So when they found primary issues, like mildly elevated blood pressures (quite reasonable given the circumstances) and elevated blood sugar levels, they referred them to me. So on top of my already hugely increased workload, I had to start responding to AVs requests. I would drive to the property of an elderly gent with high blood pressure, make him a cup of tea, chat for 30 mins and hey presto, blood pressure normal. Or I would drive to the gent with the elevated BGL to discover he simply hadn’t had his insulin for the day. Eventually I literally had to ask AV to stop helping me!!

All of the above, was entirely dependent upon my presence in town and my decision to keep the BNC open and provide ongoing services to my community. If I’d been able to evacuate as instructed, there would have been no refuge and no meals and no accomodation. It was pure luck. That seems quite problematic for future events.

In the subsequent weeks, another significant issue was the road blocks. They stopped my staff retuning to town. They stopped people being able to get to refuge, they reduced our capacity to move around the community to provide welfare. In one instance we are aware of, an 80 year old gent swam the Murray rover each day to reach the refuge centre rather than risk being unable to return to their homes. Farmers were unable to move around the area to feed

cattle and access donated fodder. The road blocks moved from day to day, and seemed to have different rules constantly, adding a layer of complexity and increased trauma to our recovery in the early days.

Finally, whilst the Premiers 1800 number to access assistance was a fantastic idea and was rolled out early, it did not work from our area. It either rang out, Or at times you could leave a message. But, the people calling the number and leaving messages had driven to our centre to use the only phones working. They returned home to where there were no phones and no chance of a return phone call. Thus, the 1800 number was of little help.

Would you like your submission to be made publicly available?	Yes
Would you like your name (or your business or organisation's name) published with your submission?	Yes
During the 2019-20 fire season, were you in an area where fires occurred?	Yes
Where were you impacted by fires?	Yes
How would you describe your connection to the area?	I am not only a resident, but I also work here. My responsibility during the fires was split between defending my own home and my responsibility to my service and my community b
Were you involved in responding to the fires in that area?	Yes
How would you best describe your involvement in responding to the fires?	Both paid role in emergency services as a RAN but also as the CEO of the WBNC a role in providing refuge, recovery and relief.
Were you (or do you continue to be) involved in supporting individuals or communities affected by the fires?	Yes
How would you best describe your involvement following the fires?	I can not select a number of the responses above. I am both a resident with a fire effected property, a paid emergency services worker as a RAN and a paid role outside government.
What is the main reason for your submission?	
What is your Local Government Area (council)?	Towong

What is your postcode or town?	3709
What age group are you in?	55-64
What gender do you identify as?	Female
Other ways to be involved in the Inquiry	Yes
Full name	Sandi Grieve
Phone number	
Email	
What types of activities would you be interested in hearing about?	Community meetings, Online or telephone surveys, Follow-up submissions
Preferred method of contact	

Acknowledgement email sent – 30 Oct 2020